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ABSTRACT

Large numbers of trained volunteers working in community-based settings are needed if adult literacy programs are to be successful. In addition, adult literacy programs must work in partnership with other community organizations. Particularly necessary are formal linkage agreements with nontraditional organizations such as service and fraternal organizations; community action agencies; and religious, cooperative, and political organizations that address the establishment of literacy programs and deal with issues of funding, public relations, and human resources. In order to reduce significantly the extent of adult illiteracy in the United States, program planners must make volunteerism a national priority and must direct funding at the continuation and expansion of proven pilot programs that serve the client. Furthermore, those communities having the greatest need for adult literacy programs must be targeted and given priority. Rather than spending money on more national conferences and studies of adult learning, planners should initiate local community conferences that would be concerned primarily with the development of local programs. (MN)

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THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

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The Role of Volunteers in Adult Literacy Programs

"We live in a society that has always depended upon volunteers of different kinds--some who can give money, others who can give time, and a great many who give freely of their special skills. If you look closely, you will see that almost anything that really matters to us, anything that really embodies our deepest commitment to the way that human life should be lived and cared for, depends on some form of volunteerism."

Margaret Mead

If we accept the validity of Margaret Mead's statement, then we cannot avoid addressing the role of volunteers in solving the problem of illiteracy in the United States. Volunteers have been fundamental in a wide range of national, and social causes. Organizations such as United Way and Red Cross have developed serious, purposeful work for volunteers and have structured their organizations to capitalize on the effective mobilization of large numbers of volunteers. The situation is no different in our battle to fight illiteracy.

First, it is important to note that learning to read is not magic and the ability to assist someone in that process does not require an intimate knowledge of voodoo. Recently, at a presentation which occurred inside a maximum security prison, I saw a slogan, "Reading is Magic." Indeed, reading is magic for these inmates, as it was a key to a life many of them had never experienced. However, reading is not magic. It is a learned capability which unlocks a series of potential choices for the individual.

One aspect of reading which does remain a mystery, however, is the actual decoding process. While a step-by-step expose of decoding is yet to be developed, we do know that given three fundamental components a potential reader is capable of deducing the decoding process. The components are:

1. A comfortable environment. Physical surroundings must be comfortable to the student and suitable for learning.

2. Relevant reading materials. Reading materials must be appropriate to the student's goals, abilities and interests.

3. Supportive relationship. The teacher, tutor, mentor, friend, pastor or other individual must be committed to assisting the person in learning how to read and have some knowledge on how to proceed.

Given this basic structure, the average individual is quite capable of assisting someone in learning how to read. And, whether the teachers are certified adult education teachers or trained volunteers, if any of the three components are lacking, the process of learning how to read will likely fail.

Considering the growing commitment to solving the illiteracy problem in the United States, the questions arise: How can we make a difference? How can we direct resources to effectively solve this problem? How can we guide the policy makers so that national direction will assist us?

If we expect to significantly reduce illiteracy in the United States, program development must address the following.

1. Programs must be community based. Specifically, programs must be rooted in the community they propose to serve.

2. Programs must develop coordinated partnerships with other public, private, and non-profit entities within the community. This role requires serious memorandums of agreement targeted at specific action.

3. Programs will need to use large numbers of trained volunteers. This aspect of programming requires a massive mobilization of thousands of volunteers.

The focus of this paper are on the program aspects of these components. It is important, too, that research and policy making focus on these program bases. We do not need, as some suggest, a redefining of the problem of illiteracy. Nor do we need additional research in the area of specific literacy needs.

Community Based Programs

The term, community based programs, has become a catch-all for a wide range of social programs. As a component for adult literacy programming, it refers to programs which have specific roots in the community. These roots extend foremost to the proposed population of service--students. Also included is the greater community which defines the general living environment and which provides teachers and tutors.

It is not always possible for programs to start from within the community they propose to serve. Even Jonathan

Kozol, long a proponent of community based organizations, suggests that "the outside spark" is sometimes needed to develop a truly community based organization.[1] Once an individual or a group initiates this outside spark, he suggests it is possible to share the initiative in the ongoing program development. These community based literacy programs may be sparked by outside assistance, and then develop effectively and cooperatively.

Having deep roots in the community means living, working, funding and establishing relationships within a particular area. Hunter and Harmon suggest that we need broad based input from communities to define what is needed in literacy programming.[2] However, they leave a serious gap at the program level with lack of recommendations on how we might seriously address this need. Regional conferences will not help address this problem. But rather we need to study model local programs which have successfully integrated local input and control.

We need to make full use of the community, not just the educational aspects. Programs must be housed not only in schools, but also in homes, churches, fire stations, and even the backrooms of local taverns if we expect to ensure that the entire community is served. Furthermore, it is important that the personnel who assist in this development process reflect the broad based community.

A quote taken from a UNESCO report sums up these issues.

> "Education suffers basically from the gap between its content and the living experience of its pupils, between the systems of values it preaches and the goals set up by society, between its ancient curricula and the modernity of science. Link education to life, associated with concrete goals, invest or rediscover an education system that fits its surroundings.[3]
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> UNESCO Report 1972

Coordinated Partnerships

A classic story of Charlie Brown helps to underscore the issue of coordinated partnerships. This cartoon shows Lucy asking Charlie to change the channel of the TV he is watching. He asks of Lucy why he should change the channel for her and she shows him an open hand. Closing it slowly, she reminds him, that spread apart the hand is nothing, but clenched together it is a weapon that is fearful to look at and worse to experience. Charlie's response is to ask which channel she would like to watch. In final drawings Charlie Brown stares at his open hand and asks, "Why can't you guys get organized and act like that?"

That kind of coordinated effort is needed today. Everyone is "willing to coordinate", but few stand ready to seriously cooperate. Numerous letters for grants and proposals of national literacy efforts expound on coordination commitment; however, we see few concrete examples of coordination. Coordination, in this regard, means commitment and commitment requires sacrifice. It is this type of commitment and sacrifice that we lack in our attack on illiteracy.

Specifically, we must require more formal linkages with non-traditional organizations. This must occur at the local, state and national level. Specific memorandums of agreement with clear action-oriented agendas must be forged. These agreements should be made with service and fraternal organizations, community action agencies, and religious, corporate and political organizations. These agreements must address the establishment of literacy programs and deal with issues of funding, public relations and human resources.

Formal programmatic linkages have been suggested by many. These linkages must become a part of all future efforts. They can take various forms from simple transfer linkages to developing joint assessment techniques. The key is that people must begin working together on specific projects. It takes courage to insist that we begin this cooperation. It isn't easy to admit that the other guy is not so bad after all.

Mobilization of Volunteers

As Pogo has so aptly suggested, we have met the enemy and he is us. This reality, which is true in many situations, is also true for the problem of illiteracy. We must face the reality that the problem is too great and the dollars are too few. We cannot expect success if dollars are going to be the requirement. Jean Paul Getty once said, "The road to success is easy. Rise early, work hard, strike oil." We are not going to strike oil, therefore, we need to rise early and work

hard. And we need a lot of "us." We need a massive number of trained volunteers to achieve our goal.

Research and experience have proven that volunteers can be effective.[4] Effective and proven volunteer programs are found in a wide range of settings. While additional research may be helpful, at this time it is only an excuse if we allow the constant assessment of programs to stand in the way of implementing worthwhile proven projects.

We must be realistic about the utilization of volunteers. Alone, they are not the answer for all problems. We must build on existing adult education structures to ensure a network of professionals and volunteers working together. United Way raises hundreds of millions of dollars every year through a sophisticated network of trained volunteers. Many individuals commit substantial portions of their time to this cause. Our challenge is to become more sophisticated in our use of volunteers. We have not yet developed mechanisms to ensure effective utilization of this untapped resource. Without national commitment to address this problem, we lack the ability to use the single most important resource available in the fight agains illiteracy.

We need to make a hard choice. If we hope to make a significant impact within the next ten years, we need to commit ourselves to massive utilization of volunteers. If we want the same level of activity or only a slight increase, we need not utilize volunteers. If we make this commitment, then every discussion involving legislation, regulation, program development and research must address the utilization of

volunteers. The battle with illiteracy can be won, but the use of volunteers in this fight must become a national priority.

National Implications

Some national implications of the commitment to volunteerism in literacy are clear while others are not. Certainly, one of the most important is in the area of research. Wide areas of research on illiteracy could be conducted with interest and vigor. However, it is clear that we have neither the time nor the resources to do all that we would like. This means we don't need to redefine the problem, nor spend large amounts of time addressing which literacy skills are better and which are needed the most. Basically, we must offer potential students the opportunity to learn communications and survival skills. These individuals will then be able to make choices effecting their own lives.

It is frequently easier to obtain money for new studies than it is for continuation and expansion of proven pilot projects. We clearly need to reverse this trend and begin to assess what works well and how to build on it.

The allocation of existing and new resources must be examined. Dollars should be directed at development and implementation of programs which serve the client. Communities with great need must be targetted and be given priority.

If volunteers are to play a critical role, then national policies must reflect a commitment to this human resource. Volunteers cannot be used as an excuse for minimizing or omitting core funding. In fact the effective use of volunteers will require additional funds designed specifically for that purpose.

These national implications point to one overriding issue: a lack of national commitment. The creativity exists. Now is the time for hard work and commitment to ensure that we can develop the programs and policies which will significantly reduce illiteracy.

Summary

We are at a critical juncture for literacy. Increased interest, increased exposure and a growing national awareness have begun to make literacy a national issue. We must not be afraid to attack the problem. Solutions are at hand. We can spend time avoiding hard work and commitment and address the problem by studying it or we can roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Community-based coordinated programs which utilize massive numbers of volunteers can and will begin to solve the problem of illiteracy in the United States. Programs with these elements will be stable and will meet the diverse needs of communities by assisting them in setting up and directing their own programs.

The time has past for broad national or regional conferences to be convened to discuss the problem. It is time now for the development of local programs that are started by convening local community "conferences" of identified leaders. If we want stable self-sufficient programs, we will need to build from the bottom up and not trickle down.

Communities stand ready to accept this challenge so long as they are assisted and supported in the initial steps. We must stop debating what type of support and assistance, and start providing what we can, and quickly.

We cannot insure that we will solve the problem of illiteracy in the United States with these approaches, but we can guarantee that we will make a very significant impact on the problem. Programs which are designed with these components will be successful. We will need to rise early, and to work hard, but we will not need to strike oil.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper addresses the role of volunteers in adult literacy programming. Linking the critical participation of volunteers with coordinated community-based programs, it suggests that these components can provide the framework for a successful attack on the problem of adult illiteracy in the United States. It is underscored that this approach is not without cost and organizational sacrifice. Finally, the paper suggests that serious inroads can be made with a greater commitment to action and less to study of the problem.

NOTES

1. Jonathon Kozol, Prisoners of Silence (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1980).

2. Carmen St. John Hunter and David Harmon, Adult Illiteracy in the United States, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

3. UNESCO, Learning to Be (Paris, United Nations, 1972).

4. John Stauffer, A Laubach Literacy Evaluation Project (Syracuse, New York: New Readers Press, 1973). and others.

5. Hunter and Harmon